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Germany's middle class happy with rampant inequality in schools

Politicians battle to change education system they say discriminates against poor and immigrant children

Alexandra Topping in Hamburg

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German children from a privileged background are four times more likely to attend Gymnasium as a child with similar grades from a working-class home. Photograph: Image Source/Rex Features

Ulrich Becker, the headteacher, has no doubt about what Germany must do to tackle inequalities in education. "We need schools that are not separated by social class – it is a huge social and political problem," he says, sitting in his office in the fading 1970s building of the Kurt Tucholsky Schule in Hamburg.

"And to those parents who don't want to deal with students who are not dropped off by a Porsche, we should say – maybe it would be better for society if you found a private school for your children," he adds, with a steely look.

Becker's school is at the heart of the battle. Politicians and education experts are eager to change a system they say discriminates against poor and immigrant children; but middle-class parents are determined to maintain a status quo that tends to favour their children by streaming them into the best schools.

Each of Germany's 16 states (or *Länder*) plans its own education system. Some offer comprehensive schools, but most children are streamed at the age of 10 into either the Gymnasium, a route to university; the Realschule, where mid-level vocational studies

are common; or the Hauptschule, for a basic secondary education.

Inequality is rampant. Children from a privileged background are four times as likely to attend Gymnasium as a child with similar grades from a working-class home and, according to the federal education body KMK, children of immigrant families attend the Hauptschule twice as often as native children – even within the same socio-economic class.

In Hamburg, the backlash against reform – and a shake-up of the status quo – has been strongest. Here, parents launched a campaign, "Wir Wollen Lernen" (We Want to Learn), which collected 182,000 votes – three times the number required to force a referendum. They won it by a convincing margin last August.

The result was a political storm which ejected the Christian Democrats (CDU) from power in the city and forced the CDU mayor, Ole von Beust, who had proposed the reforms in coalition with the Greens, to resign. Germany is now questioning whether its policy of separating children into different schools according to ability is an untouchable one.

It was a missed opportunity, says Ludger Wössmann, of the Ifo Institute for Economic Research in Munich. He says that research shows "early tracking is determined by family background, not true ability or potential", adding that "no one really gains, in terms of learning outcomes, from early tracking but it is very difficult to persuade those that think they benefit from it".

Advocates argue that unlike in the UK, where thousands of students graduate with degrees that are unlikely to lead to employment, the German education system produces a well-trained workforce.

That is no longer true because many jobs have moved to Bangladesh or China, says Andreas Schleicher, head of indicators and analysis at Pisa, the OECD's programme for international student assessment, which monitors education standards.

"In the past you only needed a small number of highly educated people, and many more to work for them," he says. "But now countries need to maximise their human capital and make sure that every person reaches their potential – if you don't you pay a very high penalty."

But Pisa's analysis of education in 2000 showed Germany lagging far behind comparable countries on academic performance and social mobility. So there were some changes. More language support for migrant children, longer school hours and more childcare have helped, says Schleicher. Although children only start school at six, compared with four in the UK, parents have access to full-time childcare from three, he says. "Before it was a huge thing to take a young child away from the parents, but now it is the norm – that is a really radical shift."

Any further change will come through a gradual shift in attitude, rather than radical reform, he adds. Even in Hamburg, though the Gymnasium and primary schooling has remained untouched, the four-track system has been replaced by two.

"Neighbourhood" schools incorporate all non-Gymnasium pupils, teaching up to the Abitur, the set of exams needed for university entry.

But enabling students to compete with the Gymnasium will be tough, says Becker, the headmaster. When his school took in pupils from the former Hauptschule in September the effect was immediate, and dramatic. "Many of them had no concept of learning, no concept of rules – they were like a lost generation. At the beginning it was chaos, I thought the whole school might collapse," he says. For several months,

teachers' focus was on behaviour, rather than learning. And while order has returned, that is unlikely to help brighter students achieve the top grades.

Becker is optimistic for his own school, but fears others will struggle: "The Gymnasium students will succeed, for them it's only a question of turning up on time. But for the rest – it's a battle."

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